

## ABSTRACT

### From Targets to Agents

#### Women's Perceptions of Their Vulnerability and the Strategies They Use to Resist

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Women in the U.S. are sexually victimized at high rates and are socialized to believe they are unable to defend themselves. While there is ample evidence that women can successfully fight off assailants using physical force (Clay-Warner, 2002; Ullman, 2007), women's self-defense training initiatives are not funded by the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) or any national anti-violence organizations (Carlson, 2014). The NRA, on the other hand, tailors programs to instruct women to use guns for self-defense leaving them as the only national organization promoting women's right to defend themselves (Carlson, 2014). This project interrogates how women think about their vulnerability and the strategies they employ to defend themselves, focusing on self-defense training and gun ownership. Using the Listening Guide (Gilligan, 2015; Sorsoli and Tolman, 2008), a feminist form of narrative analysis, I did several close "listenings" of twenty-four interviews focusing on voices of vulnerability and resistance. I also did autoethnography based on my participation in ten armed and unarmed self-defense classes. In their narratives, many women reveal strategies of resistance that directly address the form their vulnerability has taken. By taking self-defense, these women re-learned what their socialization as girls and women had left them ignorant of (Tuana, 2006); that they are capable of defending themselves. Women's narratives about guns hold many contradictions, highlighting the challenges of self and family protection in a context where guns appear to be everywhere. I propose a new conceptualization of women's resistance that is informed by vulnerability and experiences of victimization, reflecting complex personhood.